

A Community Agreement for the Po Delta Biosphere Reserve

Since Spring 2013, the main stakeholders and the Po Delta community at large have engaged in a consultation and co-management process that led to the definition of a shared vision and, further, to the adoption of strategic objectives and plan of action for the Po Delta future Biosphere Reserve. Such process represents for all actors involved a unique opportunity to overcome a quite diffused fragmented approach in territorial planning and development, this creating an ideal space for a proactive discussion and collective elaboration of more coherent and responsible future perspectives for the Po Delta interregional territory. Beyond their prescribing and technical contents, programming and planning instruments have been reviewed and integrated in order to draw more effective and long lasting development scenarios, together with a common vision, for the Po Delta community. It is our hope that such a vision could also inspire relevant stakeholders much beyond the borders of the Po Delta Biosphere Reserve.

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1. The Po Delta, looking towards new horizons

Because of its characteristics and history, the Po Delta is an emblematic territory characterised by symbiotic man-nature relationships. It is an extraordinary natural and environmental destination, but at the same time inhabited and cultivated; it is a place where land and water have been shaped by human interventions all along the centuries, and enriched with signs and memories which built the native culture and identity. It is a young territory, rich in history, a land where culture and history meet with nature and landscape splendor, thus determining a unique and very suggestive territorial identity in Europe. The Po Delta is characterised by distended atmospheres where the great territorial dimension prevails, and the population concentrates in small settlements and scattered dwellings which are far from reaching the usual Veneto and Emilia-Romagna Regions' population density; however, in this rarefied dimension it is also possible to find innovation, modernity and transformation.

This land seems close and distant at the same time, made of relationships, being a strategic passing-by place for complementary metropolitan regions and systems. In fact Po Delta has a central position: it is the final outlet of the great rivers which irrigate the Alpine and Po River basin regions, and at the same time a focal point in the Adriatic coastal arch between Trieste and Ancona, which also connects with the Dalmatian-Istria system. It encompasses plural and deeply interconnected functions: infrastructures, productive areas, harbors, natural areas, lagoons and protected areas, cities and excellent cultural and living quality centres. The Po Delta very added value lies right in this context, by matching only apparently contrasting elements, which are in fact complementary and symbiotic, the expression of a great potential and fashionable land.

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2. The Biosphere Reserve to overcome the borders of a Park

Because of the rooted interconnection between man and nature and because of the rich and complex nature of its landscapes, the Po Delta may be considered an ideal laboratory where to overcome somehow the borders of a Park. Not an isolated and distant land, where man and his activities do not exist, but a place displaying natural and environmental characteristics that have to be preserved but where human communities, through their maintenance and care, are the active protagonist of this protection.

Modernity challenges and the necessity of a new man-nature relationship equilibrium creation make such territories a place not excluded from development; instead, they represent privileged places for new, smart, intelligent, sustainable and inclusive initiatives. If we think about Po Delta territory, an idea comes into light: this is not a place separated and far from human living, inhabiting and producing activities, but it is a place where man is in fact an active and integral part of it. The separation between environmental planning and territorial-urban planning would obstacle this possible integration and it would constitute a serious threat to the conservation and the valorisation, of its natural and environmental heritage. Landscape, nature, biodiversity, tourism, culture and economy are essential elements of quality living and essential to create competitiveness within such a territory in the European context.

The Po Delta must then become a laboratory and a stage for new lifestyles experimentation, based on environmental research, green economy and soft economy, technology, biodiversity cultivation, towards a new man-nature harmony, as also suggested within the framework of the EU Horizon 2020 programme, towards sustainability, innovation, social cohesion and environment-respectful development.

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3. The governance of the Po Delta Biosphere Reserve

Working for a unified, conscious and motivated governance in Po Delta is a fundamental strategic horizon for the Biosphere Reserve creation and planning.

Government and governance have a similar Italian translation, but their meaning is significantly different. If the former is the classic government modality exercised by an administrative or political entity, the latter is the process through which local community issues are solved in a participatory and cooperative manner. Openness, participation, responsibility, effectiveness and coherence are the inspiring principles of the European concept of Governance (*White book on Governance, 2001*), which entails opinion sharing, strategies discussion and implementation, territorial complexity orientation, virtuous processes activation and competitiveness boosting.

Especially for a territory like the Po Delta, vocationally open and where relationships intertwine at different scales - European to local -, governance activation means valorising relationships, creating networks by integrating levels and competences among all involved subjects, being them public or public-private. Governance is structured at different levels:

- The wide dimension of interregional, European and global relationships: one may refer to the EU projects and initiatives in which the Po Delta is involved: the *Delta Med network*, *Delta calls Delta* initiative, *Adriapan* and, of course, the EuroMAB network and its cluster of deltaic Biosphere Reserves around the Mediterranean.
- The regional governance dimension, in which Regional Parks are having a greater relevance today, in particular in terms of territorial planning: not only nature protection but also a clear role in supporting initiatives of territorial management and development in the respect of a new man-nature relationship. In this respect, the Po Delta territory in the Veneto was included in the first Regional Landscape Planning effort dedicated to the “*Adriatic Coastal Arch – the Venice lagoon and the Po Delta*”, while in Emilia-Romagna the Po Delta area is recognized the status of a complex territorial system with natural relevance, integrated in the Adriatic system, with a strategic role in new development policies in the regional system context called “*Coastal linear conglomerate*”.

- The local governance dimension, which involves the Po Delta communities and local institutions with their peculiar characteristics. This is the dimension where to implement concrete governance choices, by sharing knowledge and the co-responsibility of innovative, proactive and creative development processes.

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4. The prevalent vocations of the Po Delta Biosphere Reserve

The Po Delta shows some prevailing specificities, a vocation that should be better valorised. This is not just about individuating external, univocal or traditional development sectors, but cultivating local peculiarities in a wider context, to open new concrete ways to development considering in particular:

Culture and history:

As for the historical, archeologic and cultural goods, Adria represents the principal pole (Verdi Theatre and Archaeology Museum) together with Papozze, Corbola and Loreo (Antiquarium, Water museum). Culture has a prominent role also in other places (Balutin, Scano Boa, Scano Cavallari). Water culture is mainly concentrated in Comacchio historical centre and its valleys, evidenced by the typical dwelling system (*casoni*) and fishing spots, while the Etruscan remains on the territory in the first and ancient Po Delta intertwine with the renaissance attempts of great coastal marshes reclamation's Estense legacy (Palù Tower, Abate Tower), and Alcina city utopia, today only represented by Estense Mesola Castel (Delizia) and its ancient walls remains.

Tourism:

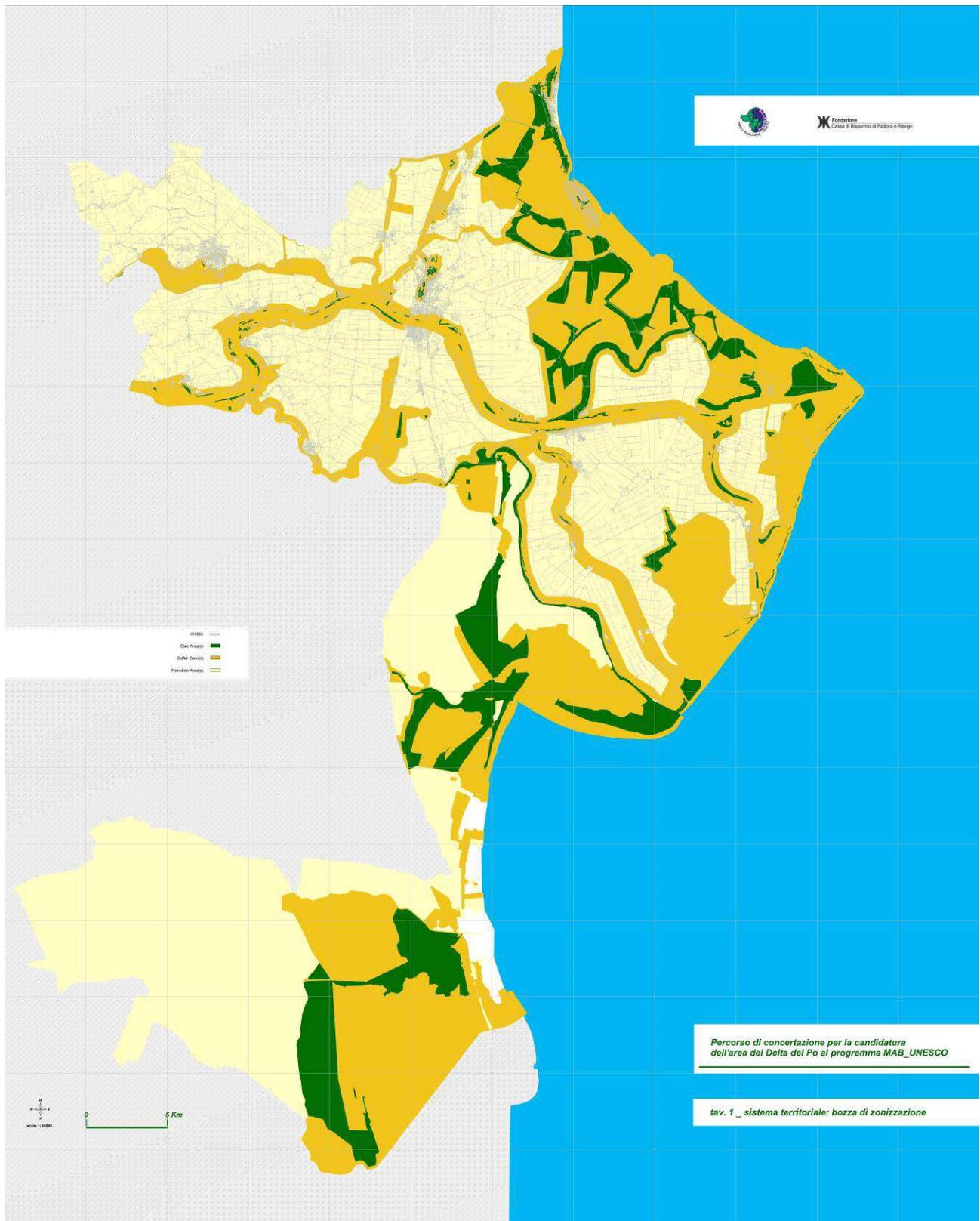
Seaside summer tourism is an important resource for Po Delta territory, mainly connected with Rosolina, Albarella, Boccasette Slow beaches - Barricata, Scano Palo, Scano Cavallari, Batteria Island - and the historical Comacchio's Lidi, used since the 60s, and the newest slow beaches in Goro.

Modernity and productivity:

Porto Viro and Comacchio-Porto Garibaldi (harbor) are modern and sustainable productive infrastructures which represent an important asset for territorial development with their renewed network of fluvial navigable channels (Fissero Tartaro-Canalbianco waterway, Ferrara waterway, with their respective logistic platforms, Volano Po and Goro Po navigability), all together forming an efficient fluvial network between Chioggia and Ravenna, strictly interconnected with the "Romea" state road.

Man and nature:

The good man and nature relationship results in agricultural and fishing excellent products, from: Goro sea inlet, Scardovari sea inlet, Mesola, Codigoro, Goro, Comacchio, Taglio di Po, Ariano Island, Porto Tolle. The Man and the Biosphere conception sees the territory as an ecosystem, productive as well, to be exploited and protected within the framework of a global recognition scheme: that of a Biosphere Reserve. The Biosphere Reserve nomination will become fundamental element not only for the governance structure but also as an asset for a global territorial marketing strategy, starting from the EXPO 2015 extraordinary occasion.



The Biosphere Reserve zonation proposal

5 . Strategic vision and objectives for the Biosphere Reserve

Based on the previous considerations, the following specific strategic lines and objectives have been proposed and agreed upon:

The macroscopic objective which becomes an umbrella element is related to the territorial-environmental quality, intended as the capability of organising, maintaining and guaranteeing the established qualitative territorial and environmental standards, so to satisfy the interested parts' requirements, through risks' evaluation methods. Territorial-environmental quality elements (biodiversity, ecologic and ecosystem functionality, landscape as the result of a positive man-nature interaction, effective and sustainable economy) will be fulfilled through specific objectives in the following three areas:

CONSERVATION FUNCTION OBJECTIVES:

- **Risks and prevention analysis:** The Po Delta, expression of a delicate equilibrium between the Po river and the Adriatic sea, is subject to multiple anthropic and natural pressures. It is important to deepen the possible effects which this type of pressures may provoke on a medium and long range, through monitoring plans. The most relevant survey sectors for this area are those related to hydraulic security, subsidence and climatic change. *Particular attention is to be paid to monitoring the socio-economic aspects of the Po Delta territory related to its ecological footprint and ecosystem services evaluation.*
- **Hydraulic security conditions improvement:** This objective must be practically translated into everyday management choices as an element which strongly interacts with the deltaic system ecologic and environmental quality conditions and, if correctly interpreted according to the most innovative knowledge, which may significantly contribute to ecosystems services and ecologic network maintenance, centred on the smaller hydrographic systems.
- **Subsidence mitigation:** Subsidence and salty wedge comeback mitigation will contribute to maintaining an high agriculture productivity while strengthening ecosystem services and functionality.
- **Climate change mitigation:** climate change may produce hardly manageable effects in a highly transformed reality as the deltaic one is. It is necessary to give environmental systems the adequate room for their natural evolution so to enable the buffering and resilient capacity of the territory against such extreme events.

DEVELOPMENT FUNCTION OBJECTIVE:

- **Coastal Areas Integrated Management:** this will address issues like: traffic and pressures increase, productive structures tangle, coastal erosion, salty water intrusion, subsidence and flooding risks, foreseen sea level rise, natural territory fragmentation, habitat isolation and territorial anthropisation which left profound negative consequences on biodiversity
- **Landscape conservation and valorisation:** a quality landscape includes ecosystems which function with compatible human activities, resources and good quality-quantity processes which constitute a real Natural Capital. Diffused income creation through these elements will make various aspects on the territory combinable.
- **Deltaic area sustainable development:** the integrated protection of some areas will need to integrate with support actions to small economic activities network creation which valorise a low environmental impact productive substratum. In this view the agro-environmental component must be promoted and preserved. Rural areas development is connected to other environmental, landscape, identity factors, together with productive, agro-food and tourist systems development, which often characterise them and which represent a development occasion. Agricultural, fishing, artisanal, commercial and tourist activities' valorisation will be implemented through the use of the Biosphere Reserve acknowledgement by the territory companies and products.

- **Fruition and sustainable tourism:** valorising goods and cultural activities is to be considered an asset to increase territorial appeal, to reinforce social cohesion and improve residents' life quality. It is necessary to overcome a purely conservative logic to organise fruition possibilities in a protected area which would give the Delta territory, in its complexity, the chance to become a relevant destination in the tourist market. *A first objective is to create an hospitality and tourist packages network, in view of EXPO 2015 as a starting point, with some specific packages developed for foreign visitors which, together with the EXPO visitation, would also offer the possibility to stay in Po Delta area, to get to know the territory and its excellency products; Po Delta educational, cultural, historical and archeologic aspects valorisation is another important aspect.*

LOGISTIC SUPPORT FUNCTION OBJECTIVES:

- **Strengthening and improvement of the Territorial Governance:** administration and local actors' knowledge and technical competences will be strengthened through research and experimental projects, in order to assure a more effective ground for a better coordination among them and their related multiple territorial planning and management tools. Particular efforts will be developed in order to better coordinate projects and actions foreseen by the various existing plans and territorial programmes, especially within the framework of the recently launched River/River Mouth Contract process for the Po Delta.
- **Collaboration and agreement upon the definition of strategies within the Biosphere Reserve Action Plan:** the dialogue system among the river banks should lead to an intensification in cultural relationships along the Po Delta. Information and educational efforts will contribute to increase their sense of ownership and responsibility towards sustainable development of the whole Po Delta area.

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6. From vision to action: some priority actions

Biosphere Reserve Doors: Comacchio, Goro, Codigoro, Adria, Ariano nel Polesine, Rosolina, Battery Island: (physical) identification of the welcoming venues and territorial identity marking perceived not only from an environmental point of view but also from a tangible one.

Biosphere Reserve House: the Parks' headquarters will host the Biosphere Reserve House which should go beyond the logistic-administrative function, and also be an incubator of entrepreneurship capacity which should constitute a fundamental platform for the Biosphere Reserve's many initiatives. New employments possible proposals for the new generations should find financial and organizational support so to enter the economic arena for pushing forward the Biosphere Reserve concept which also encompasses development issues.

Biodiversity values knowledge: in collaboration with University Institutions and Research Bodies, natural characteristics constant monitoring will be the base to develop new investments and protection proposals.

Environmental protection towards sustainable development: economic activities and private properties have always played a fundamental role in the preservation of natural areas, and new and commonly agreed forms of environmental management should be defined in straight collaboration with these realities, overcoming old conservation conceptions.

Lagoon and transition waters vivification-maintenance: Canals digging, hydraulic intervention with the aim of reclamation and river mouth contract will find support and issue solving solutions within the Parks, in collaboration with Reclamation Institutions and Consortia.

Invasive species control: invasive species restraint and collaboration to reduce species harmful to the hydraulic defense should become a constant effort (also economic) within the Biosphere Reserve territory.

European investment project proposal: Europe represents a project dimension which the Po Delta territory has developed in these years and which should be pursued by including in the debate young and entrepreneurial actors in order to promote projects which could activate jobs opportunities as well as investments (cultural ones as well).

Information and education of the new generations: Information projects and initiatives in school settings of all categories is a fundamental basis to form a sense of identity and ownership related to the priceless cultural and environmental territorial values of the Po Delta. Existing projects will be further developed, reinforced and widened.

More details can be found in the attached Action Plan for the coming five years.

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7. Concluding...

The forwarding of the Biosphere Reserve Nomination form could not be seen as the conclusion of such a process which already led to a better integration of planning processes and related actions in favour of the whole Po Delta territory. This is why the Biosphere Reserve must be seen as tool to improve territorial planning involving the existing protected areas together with a wider territory where the local community interacts with its environment to generate a territory, the expression of artistic, technologic, economic and cultural richness, an heritage for all.

The present “Po Delta Communities Agreement” has been shared with all the relevant Po Delta Stakeholders, signatory of the agreement through which the Biosphere Reserve governing body has been established. It will guide then in any planning, management and development action that will take place in the future Po Delta Biosphere Reserve.